# A Trust Betrayed:

## The Role and Evolution of the Arthur- Mordred Relationship in Medieval Arthurian Texts

**Research Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation with Research Distinction in English Studies in the Undergraduate Colleges of The Ohio State University**

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**June 2012**

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## I: Introduction

An internet image search for "Mordred" reveals the simplistic, yet popular, representation of the most important villain of the Arthurian canon. Picture after picture of Mordred from films and artistic renderings show a pale, glassy-eyed, and scowling menace or a faceless knight in a suit of blood-stained armor, wielding a ludicrously large and impractical sword in battle. This is, unfortunately, the popular view of the traitor Mordred, but one that belies the unique complexity of his role within the narrative. He is a dynamic and fascinating character— a literary figure that continually confounds and amazes. First and foremost, I have no desire to defend Mordred as righteous, chivalric, or even rational. To do so would be to deprive an ancient legend of its necessary antagonist. The Arthur story, though purportedly based in history, is ultimately a work of fiction, and while history reveals few true villains, literature by its very nature requires them. Mordred is a bad man. However, he is a good villain and fills an important role in the narrative.

It is important to mention that Mordred appears in chronicles and literature as early as Arthur himself. Yet what little is known of the historical Mordred is discouragingly ambiguous. While this work is largely unconcerned with historical truth, looking to the early recordings of Arthur in Latin chronicles and Welsh poetry gives us a basis for understanding how the legend evolved from history. The historical context widely attributed to Arthur and Camelot places him in a period of great chaos, migration, and warring throughout Europe following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. The Britannic outposts were the first to be abandoned (ca. 410 CE) by the Roman legions as barbarian incursions on the Continent forced the Empire into the defensive. Vulnerable and harried by Pict and Scottish forces from the North, the military

leaders of Britain, most notably a warlord named Vortigern, invited Saxon mercenaries to aid in their defense. Afterward, the mercenaries become colonists, then outright invaders. While the speed and brutality of the Saxon (as well as Angle, Jute and Frisian) invasion is debated, what is certain is that the newcomers were intent on occupation of, not integration with, the native population. It is in this context that Arthur rises to fame, fighting a series of twelve battles against the Germanic onslaught, as recorded by the Welsh historian Nennius in his *Historia Brittonum* (ca. 800). Yet Nennius' account is still a pseudo-history as it layers the fantastical and legendary atop uncertain facts. Thus, from even the earliest mentions of Arthur, historical authenticity is mired in folklore likely to have been widely circulating long before any scribe put his quill to parchment. Supporting this assumption is the corpus of *Welsh Triads*, first found in thirteenth century manuscripts, but containing textual material that is undoubtedly older because the *Triads* only allude to persons and events while presupposing the readers' (or listeners') familiarity with them. In this work Mordred (spelled Medrawd but unquestionably synonymous) is depicted as cruel, gluttonous, and belligerent in his conduct at court. Furthermore, the *Triads* mention, in concordance with the earlier Latin history, the *Annals of Cambria*, that Arthur and Mordred both died at the battle of Camlaan, though offer no insight as to whether they fought with or against one another. Yet one can easily see how this negative depiction of Mordred in Welsh history would lend itself to the assumption that Arthur and Mordred were enemies and that the conflict between them ultimately led to their deaths.

These very early sources do not present a cogent or even perceptible narrative arc, instead providing a number of persons and events that must first be assembled and explicated in order to get even a vague picture of how they relate to one another. In essence, medieval authors were tasked with shaping a narrative out of a loose collection of "facts" that were long faded from any

living memory and largely obscured by the nationalistic and fantastical elaborations of the oral tradition. To consider what facets of the Arthur legend are now lost is an exercise in agony to the Arthurian scholar, and one of ultimate futility. What is important to understand is how the legend was passed down orally for several hundred years before being recorded in writing, and how medieval writers took the broadly placed "stepping-stones" of the Arthur legend and inserted their own interpretations between them in order to form a number of complete, but competing, narratives. This is why Mordred is so critical to Arthurian studies. While so briefly mentioned in the early texts, medieval writers situate him at the center of Arthur's downfall. Why this positioning occurs is an item of speculation: perhaps it is his unflattering depiction in the *Welsh Triads*, or an element of oral tradition now lost. Regardless, medieval writers saw a villain in Mordred and employed him as such. On a purely narrative level, the villain is a necessary element, as he amplifies the righteousness of his enemy through wickedness and forces the story into its necessary pattern of conflict and resolution. The biblical tradition is apparent: Satan betrays his "father" and corrupts his greatest creation. For Arthur, that creation is his kingdom and Round Table of knights and Mordred, like Satan, channels the unconsciously destructive elements of the human psyche through his rebellion to undermine and obliterate the best intentions of the father. However, if I may state the glaringly obvious: Arthur is not God, and this is where the medieval interpretations show their most intriguing facets. Arthur makes critical mistakes of both moral and political natures that allow Mordred to expose and exploit his king's human frailties. Yet this basic paradigm varies throughout the medieval sources, and its reapplication yields a great deal of insight through variation.

The Arthurian tradition is not unique to Britain alone; it is a pan-European phenomenon. In the Medieval age, French authors also made vast contributions to the canon, along with their

British counterparts. While I will address the more specific minutiae of their differences later, a general trend is important to be aware of for the purposes of this thesis. That is, that the British sources tend to focus on political action and a secular chain of events to explain Arthur's destruction by Mordred, while the French literary interpretation is largely concerned with exploring the role of divine will and destiny. In both cases, Arthur's downfall is the narratological inevitable, but the means by which that inevitable is reached differs. The Medieval British sources to be addressed here are Geoffrey of Monmouths's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Layamon's *Brut*, and the *Alitterative Morte Arthur*, all of which present a distinctly temporal worldview. By comparison, the expansive *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles will provide the counterpoint of divine will and predestination in the French tradition. Most significantly, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* provides an intriguing take on both traditions, as Malory attempts to weave them together, the result being a complex view of mankind's relation to God and the limits of human agency.

Seeking a unifying theory of Sir Mordred's purpose across the entirety of the Arthurian canon is a problematical endeavor, and one that yields little more than vague conclusions that belie the complexity of such a critical character. The separate trajectories of Arthur and Mordred as characters are inextricably interdependent and ultimately coterminous, and through an intricate story line Mordred and Arthur literally as well as figuratively create one another and the mutual circumstances they find themselves in. By necessity, there is no speaking of Mordred without speaking of Arthur. Through his father's mistakes, Mordred the unexceptional knight of the Round Table becomes Mordred the villain and usurper. Yet Arthur's mistakes occur on moral as well as political levels, and there is little cross-canon agreement regarding which is ultimately more integral to his downfall. As a conceptual "lens" through which to view the

Arthurian legend, Roger Sherman Loomis, in his book *The Development of Arthurian Literature*, identifies three forces at work in the literature. First, there is the continuous and intractable changing of fortune, which all characters are subject to, and provides much of the momentum of the English sources. Second, the "retributive justice" of the divine which Loomis adeptly notes is "less clearly defined," but unmistakably present, particularly in the French sources. Yet the overriding force found in all the medieval sources is that of character. It is character, ultimately, which has the capacity to evoke or pacify the wrath of God, to speed or slow the turning of fortune's wheel.[1] What the Arthur-Mordred relationship does, then, is create a conceptual space within the story, a forum in which the medieval authors explore the most salient political concepts of the Middle Ages as they are informed and updated by the authors' historical circumstances. The Arthur-Mordred legend is continually re-invoked as a reference point and cautionary tale for political relationships. In the broadest sense, medieval writers use Mordred to explore why evil exists in the world, and in doing so also address the issues of divinity, fate, political rights, kinship, and merit in the martial culture of the Early Middle Ages.

## II. Mordred's Conception and the Role of Divine Will

Taking primacy in the episode of Mordred's conception is the role of divine will and destiny. The *Vulgate Cycle* sets Mordred from the moment of his conception on a mortally intersecting trajectory with Arthur. He is *destined* to destroy Arthur as the bastard child of incest, both the embodiment of Arthur's sin and the one sent to punish that sin. Yet Mordred is by no means saintly, and his death is just as deserved as Arthur's. The moral circumstances of their mutual termination are unique and multifaceted: a son created in sin is sent to punish the

[1] Loomis, Roger Sherman. *The Development of Arthurian Romance*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

father, yet in doing so he commits a grave sin himself. Therefore, the *Vulgate Cycle* explores the morally (and mortally) destructive nature of incest and patricide through a lens of divine purpose and judgment without simplifying the complexity of the ethical circumstances presented in the legend of Arthur's death. Comparatively, Mordred's conception, birth, and infancy are inconsequential and unmentioned events in the pre-Malory British tradition. It is not until the French *Vulgate* that it comes to bear any symbolic or narrative importance. According to all the sources, Mordred is of the Orkeney clan, a son of King Lot (or *Loth*) and a younger brother of Gawain, Arthur's most loyal knight, and, depending on the source, his brothers include Sir Aggravain, Sir Gaheret and Sir Gareth (Gawain is the only consistent brother, the other three are inserted as to fulfill narrative roles as the story expands). In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History,* and in Layamon's *Brut*, Mordred's conception is inconspicuous because there is no implicit indication that he is destined to become treacherous. In these sources, Mordred, like any other human being, is born innocent; ultimately it is his character as a man and his life circumstances that make him the villain of the story. However, there exists in some British sources the suggestion that Mordred's conception is not all that it seems: the author of the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* claims that "That false traitour, Sir Mordred,/ The kinges soster son he was/ And eek his own son, as I rede."[2] Though the author shades this statement in ambiguity and circumvents outright accusation, this is nothing short of a "bombshell." Even the implication of Arthur's siring Mordred places them both in a circle of unnatural sin— incest, adultery, bastardom— and makes Arthur culpable of (literally) fostering his own destruction.

[2] King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure. Editor Larry D. Benson. Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS (consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages), 1994. ll. 2954-2956

While British authors may shy away from condemning their legendary king in such a manner, the French source seems to exhibit no such qualms. A foolish depiction of Arthur was not uncommon in the French tradition. As early as Chrétien De Troyes, Arthur is often depicted as a lusty, reveling, and ineffective king, as well as a hopeless cuckold. To portray Arthur otherwise would not serve French nationalistic interests, as this image of the king amplifies the prowess and righteousness of France's most important addition to the Arthurian canon: the magnanimous and awe-inspiring Sir Lancelot. With that in mind, the *Post-Vulgate* uses the "foolish" characterization of Arthur to explain Mordred's conception. The *Post-Vulgate* details how a court was summoned at Carduel after Arthur's coronation, and in attendance was "the wife of King Lot of Orkney, the king's sister. But she did not know that she was his sister"[3] It is important to note that the author claims that *she* did not know of the consanguinity; Arthur does not yet know of his own lineage. Furthermore, he "paid her great honor, because she was a crowned queen and of high lineage, kin to Uther Pendragon." Then, "he saw that the lady was beautiful and loved her passionately… until finally he lay with her and begat on her Mordred."[4]

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, in joining the British and French traditions, follows this basic chain of events, making Mordred, first and foremost, a product of Arthur's sin. In coupling with his sister, Arthur begets a bastard son of incest. Though Malory editorializes, claiming that Arthur "knew nat that [Morgause] was his sister,"[5] like in the *Post-Vulgate*, this is hardly an exoneration. When Morgause and Arthur first meet, she is acting as an envoy on behalf of King

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[3] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. VIII.* General Editor Norris J. Lacy. Translator Martha Asher. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010. Originally published by Garland 1992-1996. p.3

[4] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 3.

[5] Malory, Sir Thomas, *Le Morte Darthur*. Ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd. (New York: W.W. Norton & co., 2004), 30.

Lott, her husband. Even in knowing this fact, Arthur still "caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her."[6] In this context it seems that Arthur's "grete love" is euphemistic, and his "desire" explicitly sexual. Though Morgause does agree to the affair,[7] in both cases, it is Arthur who instigates it, and thus the bulk of the sin falls on his head. It is in this incident that Arthur forsakes caution and modesty for lust and sin. He knows full well that he is party to adultery and sex out of wedlock— imprudent actions in both the temporal world of politics as well as the spiritual realm of Christian theology. He knowingly transgresses the divine will governing his world through his own will and sets in motion a metaphysical re-balancing.

In both the *Vulgate* and Malory's *Morte*, this re-balancing first takes the form of prophetic dreams that are frightening to, but not understood by, Arthur. He does not yet know what he has done and what will come of it. Immediately following the affair, as Malory relates, Arthur has a dream in which:

> There was com into hys londe gryffens and serpents, and hym thought they brente and slowghe all the people in the londe; and than he thought he fought with them and they dud hym grete harme and wounded hym full sore, but at last he slew hem.[8]

This dream appears to be the first indication of the chain of events set in motion by Arthur's fathering of Mordred. The serpents especially symbolize the traitor, and the *Post-Vulgate* even toys with his name for dramatic effect from the traditional "Medraut" or "Modrod" to Mordred, a name more akin to the French *mordre*, meaning "to bite." Arthur, in his dream-battle, is "wounded ful sore," but defeats his enemy. While Malory does not specifically indicate that

[6] Malory, 30.

[7] Malory, 30.

[8] Malory, 30.

Arthur's dream wound was mortal, the *Post-Vulgate* does, claiming that, "the king killed the serpent, but he himself was severely wounded, so that he had to die."[9] In the context of the French fixation on predestination, the word choice is unsurprisingly fatalistic: he *had* to die, with no ambiguity— nothing less than certain death is offered here.

However, the dream is still a mystery to Arthur and it is Merlin who must explicate it. Arthur encounters Merlin during a hunting expedition who explains, according to the *Post-Vulgate*, that Arthur "will come to sorrow and exile because of a knight who is begotten but not yet born. All this kingdom will be destroyed by him…and because of him the land will be orphaned."[10] Malory makes Merlin's prophecy more specific, explaining to Arthur that the baby "sholde destroy hym."[11] Yet in both Malory's *Morte* and the *Post-Vulgate*, Merlin's role in this incident is limited, as he relates the prophecy, but does not offer any solutions. Because he is a supernatural being, Merlin knows better than to intercede against the will of God to correct aberrations in the natural order. In this context, his ability to see the future through prophecy is no different from his ability to see the past through memory. What has happened, and what will happen according to a divine agenda, cannot be changed. In the *Post-Vulgate*, Merlin explains to Arthur he that will not specify *which* baby is the fated usurper, because doing so would endanger his (Merlin's) soul. Merlin explains to Arthur that, "never, God willing, will Our Lord's creature receive harm through me. For however faithless he may be toward the end, as long as he is innocent, anyone who killed him would be false.[12]" What Merlin proposes is a

[9] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 4

[10] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 9

[11] Malory, 39.

[12] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 10

complex view of fate and divinity. Though Mordred is destined to betray Arthur, he cannot be held accountable for actions he has not yet committed. This places Arthur in the inextricable situation of knowing he is to be betrayed but unable to take any action against it until it is already happening. Arthur, in the *Vulgate*, presses Merlin further for the baby's identity, and Merlin relates that "he will be born the first day of May in the Kingdom of Logres," and furthermore, he assures Arthur that, "by this you think to find him. But you won't, for it does not please Our Lord."[13] What Merlin is trying to convey is that to commit a sin (killing an innocent) does not correct the initial sin (Arthur's incest). What Arthur fails to realize, despite Merlin also relating Arthur's lineage in this episode, is how his relationship with his sister and Merlin's prophecy connect, and how his act of sin has spawned, in Mordred, the very personification of punishment for that sin. Therefore, Arthur orders all the "May-day" babies to be gathered, and in Malory's *Morte*, he has them placed on a ship and set adrift at sea in order to put their fate in God's hands. In an act of divine will or a fortunate coincidence (Malory is typically unspecific) the ship sinks, sparing only Mordred. In the *Post-Vulgate*, the babies are also set adrift, but the outcome is less grim, as "it did not please Our Lord, that [the babies] be thus endangered, for He saw who had not deserved to perish in this manner. He gave such aid by His divine mercy that the ship arrived at a castle."[14] Here we see the *Post-Vulgate* author(s) editorializing in such a way as to further press the theme of divine will governing the narrative realm. However, in the *Post-Vulgate*, the infant Mordred is not among the May-day babies, instead, his ship wrecks before even arriving at Arthur's court. Mordred is discovered floating in a basket and adopted by Sir Sagremor, a member of the Round Table, and raised to be a knight. Arthur's attempt to rid himself of this

[13] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 10

[14] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 38

child has made it a near-guarantee that Mordred, the harbinger of Arthur's fate, will one day be a knight of the Round Table. Thus Arthur, like the biblical king Herod, fails to trick a prophecy with an act appalling for its sheer human cruelty, as well as unthinkable in a time when infant mortality rates were already staggering and noble children were critical in maintaining a royal lineage. The fact that Arthur even considers such a course of action is a grotesque reflection on his character. Furthermore, the cowardice and foolishness of such an action guarantees the realization of Merlin's prophecy. Arthur assumes that he can trick prophecy with an ill-conceived plan that plays right into the divine will guiding his destiny. A conspicuously unique addition by the *Post-Vulgate* is a scar on Mordred's face received during infancy. The author explains that "when the mother was putting the child into the cradle, it happened that he struck his head, which [left a scar that] was visible all his life."[15] Yet this scar is not necessarily an outward symbol of an intrinsic internal defect, but an indicator of the special role he is to play in the narrative. In other words, Mordred's scar is not synonymous with a "mark of Cain," because he has not yet committed any crime, but instead a sign of the extraordinary circumstances under which he was conceived and brought into the world. M. Victoria Guerin, in her book *The Fall of Kings and Princes: Structure and Destruction in Arthurian Tragedy*, is quick to point out that the circumstances of Mordred's conception are not automatic indicators of his treacherous character later in the text. She claims that "it is striking how often these births [of Arthurian characters] are in some way irregular by their association with magic, illicit sexual encounters, or with tragedy."[16] Merlin, Arthur, and Galahad are conceived out of wedlock; Lancelot, Bors, and

[15] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 36. Editor's brackets.

[16] Guerin, M. Victoria. *The Fall of Kings and Princes: Structure and Destruction in Arthurian Tragedy.* Stanford University Press, 1995. p. 22

Lionel are all orphaned or disinherited and raised by the Lady of the Lake. In fact, Guerin states "an otherwise sinful sexual liason is often the necessary condition for the birth of an exceptional child."[17] The only unique facet of Mordred's conception is the incest through which it occurred. Yet neither Arthur nor Morgause knew of their consanguinity when the tryst occurred, so how can they be held accountable for their mistake? The texts indicate that ignorance does not excuse the affair in a temporal or spiritual sense, as it is that ignorance that ultimately destroys him. In essence, whether he had known or not, the result is the same. The political message embedded here is one of caution: in a world where noble children were frequently raised apart, then interbred with other closely linked noble families, the danger of incest was high. Yet Arthur, lusty and unaware of his relation to Morgause and in this brief, but critical, episode of sinfulness, sets himself and Mordred outside of the natural order and on to a path of mutual destruction.

## III: Mordred's Early Knighthood, Usurpation, and the Role of Character

The reasons *why* Mordred decided to usurp Arthur's kingship are as elusive as they are varied. No source has explicitly indicated a motive, yet many hint at the possibilities. In the French sources, his love for Guinevere is implicitly suggested as a motivating factor. Yet if usurping the kingdom is Mordred's way of wooing her, his efforts are belligerent, misguided, and ultimately abortive. Thus, this suggestion adds to the characterization of Mordred as a simple scoundrel, not as a cunning and heartless villain. Layamon and Malory take no measures to illuminate this topic, and by omission suggest that Mordred usurped Arthur's kingdom simply *because he could*. Yet under this paradigm, once again his actions are not the result of great

[17] Guerin. *The Fall of Kings and Princes.* p. 22

cunning, but the opportunistic exploitation of circumstances created by Arthur, not Mordred. Is it possible that Mordred felt robbed of a royal birthright by his illegitimacy and that to usurp the crown was the only way to gain what he felt he rightfully deserved? While it is possible, there are no textual indicators of this, and to psychoanalyze a character from medieval literature is to run the risk of superimposing modern concepts that did not exist when the work was written. There are also no textual indicators that Mordred held any particular enmity against Arthur, or that he felt himself more suitable to run the kingdom. Ultimately, readers are left in the cold as far as Mordred's particular motivations for usurping Arthur. Yet while this may frustrate modern audiences who expect a greater degree of psychological explication than medieval texts tend to provide, in this case *why* Mordred was compelled to betray Arthur is impossible to conclude and ultimately subordinated to the simple fact that he *does*. Thus it is *how* that becomes the critical question in this issue. As stated above, the means by which Mordred betrays Arthur are by exploiting Arthur's personal failings and misjudgments. These mistakes, whether moral or political, form something of a treatise on correct behavior. Yet these mistakes are not simply confined to the realm of medieval kings, but are common human mistakes. The difference between Arthur's mistakes and the same mistakes made by a common person is that the consequences of Arthur's faults resonate on a much greater scale.

The relationship between Arthur and Mordred has much to say about medieval morality. The nature of medieval power relationships was an incredibly complex system based on interpersonal relationships of mutual dependence, one that was at once economic, political, military, social, and often familial. The joining of all these roles into one lord-and-vassal relationship made government a highly idealized "house of cards" that presupposes socio-political loyalty to maintain itself. Individual character was the binding force of this political

institution, and as the Arthur legend goes to show, a single "weak link" can break the entire structure. Often, medieval philosophies also dangerously equate power with merit, the theological assumption being that he who comes to power through arms was favored by God to do so. Yet If God is assumed to favor the victor in battle, whom does God favor when there is none? There will be more to say about this later. What is important now is that the historical reality of medieval politics is far detached from its ideal conception. This is a prevalent theme across the medieval Arthurian canon, and there is no question that medieval peoples understood the contradictions in an all too real fashion. While Mordred in concept owes unflagging loyalty to his king, the reality in no way resembles the ideal. Furthermore, the concept of "right to rule" through martial success is severely undermined by the fact that Mordred does, at least briefly, become king. Analysis of the Arthur-Mordred relationship during this critical phase in the story forms a type of treatise on the determining factor of individual character in medieval power relations. Arthur's primary mistake is to place too much faith in his idealized governmental vision while remaining blind (sometimes willfully so) to the existing reality. Mordred, on the other hand, shows the true color of his character in a number of instances regarding his early knighthood and the period leading up to his usurpation of the kingdom. Here, Mordred's actions are often morally ambiguous, neither honorable, nor dishonorable. It is also worth reiterating that at this point in the story, Mordred has not done anything decisively villainous or treacherous. Even though the *Vulgate* and Malory's *Morte Darthur* place him in the grip of intractable destiny, it was not Mordred's personal fault that created these circumstances. He is a puppet of fortune or an instrument of divine will, and in this sense, Mordred is a sad story. While his destiny is to punish (and ultimately destroy) Arthur for his egregious sin, Mordred, as the product of that sin, was never *meant* to exist and his only true purpose in life is to enact the wrath

of God. He is an accidental, unwanted son and a pale shade of his father's greatness; Mordred inherits nothing from Arthur: not kingdom, not prowess, not skill. He is only destined to destroy his father, but even in doing so, Mordred gains nothing but his own destruction as well. Yet to reiterate, this is no defense of Mordred or his actions. Just like Arthur knowingly transgresses the divine order, so does Mordred. To usurp a kingdom and kill one's father are decidedly ignoble and unnatural. Mordred could have been the faithful steward while Arthur was away, respected Guinevere, and hand the kingdom back upon his father's return. Yet while he *could* have, Mordred is not "the faithful steward." He is a scoundrel and a belligerent opportunist. These are the qualities of his character that have the ability to shape both his and Arthur's destinies.

## Mordred's Early Knighthood

Because Mordred is, after all, a knight, his primary purpose in life and very sense of identity is directly rooted in this role. Like all Round Table knights, he is guided by an ingrained impulse to constantly test his prowess against the "swords of fortune." Yet for all of Mordred's desire to fight, he lacks the qualities that make an exemplary knight like Arthur or Gawain. Geoffrey's *History of The Kings of Britain* and Layamon's *Brut* provide no illustration whatsoever of Mordred's knightly skill (or lack thereof) before he usurps the kingdom. This exemption perhaps speaks to the fact that there is little to say on the topic, or perhaps that the authors purposefully omitted such instances in order to makes Mordred's usurpation all the more shocking when it happens. Later in the tradition, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and the *Vulgate* author(s) will add instances of Mordred's knighthood to "flesh-out" the deficiencies in his knightly skill and character. Yet still, Mordred's conspicuous absence in all major quests and

battles speaks sufficiently to his inferior qualities as a knight. Let us look at a particularly intriguing instance of Mordred's early knighthood from the *Post-Vulgate*, one that illustrates the consistent moral ambiguity of his actions during this phase of the legend. This instance also illuminates both Mordred's lack of skill and his willingness to opportunistically exploit the chivalric code to his own ends. In this minor incident, Sir Eric encounters Mordred and challenges him to single combat. The narrator is curiously anecdotal as to why Eric challenges Mordred stating only that, "if anyone asked me the cause of this hatred, I would tell him what I found written, that Eric hated Mordred this way because of a first cousin of his whom Mordred had killed that year by treachery." [18] When Mordred sees Eric he knows that, "he must joust, for he would be shamed if he refused."[19] While Mordred understands and recognizes the knightly necessity of this fight, the language of the passage conveys some reluctance in Mordred to engage in it. His ultimate reason for doing so is the threat of public criticism, not a rigidly internalized sense of knightly duty that one may observe in his brother Sir Gawain, for instance. Though Mordred is "quick" and "valiant enough" in the duel, nevertheless, the narrator relates, "he certainly did not have Eric's prowess."[20] As the duel continues, "Mordred was tired, slowed, and much diminished in prowess…and at that point he would have given a great deal to have been delivered from that fight with honor," as Eric "he now knew well, was a considerably better knight."[21] Mordred does, in fact, receive a strange twist of fortune in his sword breaking. He appeals to the chivalric code to end the fight, as Eric cannot rightfully kill him unarmed. Yet

[18] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* General Editor and Translator Norris J. Lacy. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. p.361

[19] *Lancelot-Grail*. p. 361

[20] *Lancelot-Grail.* p. 361

[21] *Lancelot-Grail.* p. 362

Mordred boldly cautions Eric against considering himself the victor. He claims that, "you shouldn't think you've defeated me. Rather, my sword failed me at need."[22] Mordred is correct here: Eric would win no prowess by killing an unarmed man. However, in this instance, it is a technicality that Mordred rather enthusiastically invokes when he knows he is outmatched. Even though Mordred escapes the battle with his life, he does so, as the narrator relates, "wounded, shamed, and degraded"[23] while muttering oaths of revenge.

This episode is one of very few across the entirety of the Arthurian canon regarding Mordred's knighthood before he usurps Arthur's crown. It is, however, particularly unique in exemplifying Mordred's character as a knight. He is capable, but middling in skill. He understands the chivalric honor code, but does not shy from hiding behind it when outmatched. This episode shows Mordred's clever, but not entirely honorable, rationalization of his "non-defeat." This is just about the best outcome he can hope for, because against Eric, Mordred is fighting a conventional duel, and it is one he cannot win. Furthermore, since it is a public duel, Mordred cannot defeat Eric through treachery, and thus, cannot defeat him at all. Unlike, of course, the treacherous slaying of Eric's cousin, which brought the two knights into conflict in the first place.

## Mordred's Usurpation

Early sources such as the *Annals Cambria* and *The Welsh Triads* are not complete stories, and thus make no mention of Mordred attempting to usurp Arthur's kingdom. Sparse clues of

[22] *Lancelot-Grail.* p. 362

[23] *Lancelot-Grail.* p. 362

Mordred's ill character in the *Triads* and the ambiguity of his and Arthur's mutual deaths at Camlaan hardly form a cohesive story. This narrative void allowed later medieval authors to alter the emerging storyline to their specific needs. One great question the authors sought to answer was why, after all, did Arthur leave his kingdom in the hands of Mordred? Also, by what means was Mordred able to usurp the crown of a magnanimous king such as Arthur? The medieval sources offer a plethora of answers by subtle alterations to the relationship between Arthur and Mordred. What this section of the overall narrative is concerned with is the role of character. In the *Vulgate* and Malory, Arthur's character is illuminated through his unwitting incest and the destruction of the May-Day Babies, which invokes the retribution of divine justice. It is the early knighthood and the initial usurpation of Arthur's kingdom which gives us insight into Mordred's character in relation to Arthur's and how this flawed association spurs the downfall of Camelot.

First of all, Mordred does not appear to be the most logical choice for steward. His knighthood up to this point has been less-than-exemplary. He is, however, a member of Arthur's extended family (at least his nephew), and this seems to be the key factor in the decision. Geoffrey of Monmouth neglects to explain outright Arthur's logic here, but kinship seems to be a factor, as he states that, "He handed over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his queen, Guinevere."[24] It would appear that in Geoffrey's account Mordred and Guinevere are co-rulers in Arthur's stead. This is a wise choice: should one's loyalty suffer, the other will keep him or her in check. However, Arthur does not count on them forming a treacherous and romantic relationship together. Geoffrey's Arthur is one who is deceived, not by

[24] Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Translator Lewis Thorpe. Baltimore: Penguin, 1966. p. 237

willful ignorance, but instead victimized by his own ideals: trust in the bonds of kinship and marriage, certainty in his right to rule and his vassals' recognition of, and loyalty to, this fact. This is the paradigm that Layamon carries into his *Brut,* though with additional layers of narrative and nuance. Layamon explains Arthur's reasoning in appointing Mordred to steward:

> He was Arthur's kinsmen, of royal lineage, an extremely bold knight, and he had a very proud spirit. The son of Arthur's sister, he paid court to the queen. That was an evil deed— he committed treason against his uncle! But all was peace in court and hall, for no one imagined that it could be so, taking it upon trust because Gawain was his brother, the most loyal man who ever came to court. Because of Gawain, Mordred was the more esteemed by men, and the most valiant Arthur favored him greatly.[25]

Layamon's illumination of the situation is most welcome. Arthur has once again put great faith in the bonds of kinship, but in the *Brut* his logic becomes flawed by way of Layamon's explanation of it. Here, Arthur is unaware of the potentially dangerous aspects of Mordred's character, as "pride" and "boldness" are risky qualities in a steward, as Arthur comes to find out. Furthermore, Arthur, as well as the rest of court, has based his opinion of Mordred wholly upon that of Gawain, the "most loyal." This is an unwise assumption to make, but one based on the prevailing belief that noble birth equates to noble character and that since Gawain and Mordred are of the same family, they share the same character.[26] Yet Mordred's appointment to steward by way of Gawain begs the question, why did Arthur not leave Gawain in charge? The answer lies in the alliterative *Morte,* which offers a very different account of these events. Arthur invests Mordred with the stewardship and promises to crown Mordred king upon his return, stating, "when I to countree come, if Christ will it thole;/And thou have grace goodly to govern

[25] Layamon. *Brut*. Edition and Translation by W.J.R. Barron and S.C. Weinberg. New York: Longman Publishing, 1995. p. 177

[26] This paradigm becomes even more complicated in the *Vulgate* and *Morte Darthur* when Mordred is Arthur's son by incest, in which case he is quite technically not of the same genetic fabric of his brothers.

thyselven,/ I shall crown thee, knight, king with my hands."[27] This is the best offer that Mordred ever hears: he will be king whether or not Arthur dies on his campaign, yet Mordred wants no part in it. Instead he begs Arthur not to leave him behind:

> I beseek you, sir, as my sib lord,
> That ye will for charitee chese you another,
> For if ye put me in this plitt, your people is deceived;
> To present a prince estate my power is simple;
> When other war-wisse are worshipped hereafter,
> Then may I, forsooth, be set but at little.
> To pass in your presence my purpose is taken
> And all my perveance appert for my pris knightes.[28]

This is no feigned humility. Mordred wants only martial prowess, not political power. Yet while he is brother to Gawain, and is respected by dint of this fact, Mordred is not an exemplary knight, and this, I would like to suggest, is why he is left behind to steward the kingdom. Ultimately, Mordred, unlike his brother, is not necessary on campaign or in battle. In this context, Mordred's usurpation of Arthur's kingship seems to be the means by which he finds the fighting he so desperately wanted to be a part of. If he would have been king one way or the other, why usurp? Because it is fame in battle that Mordred wants, and he makes a bold statement in betraying Arthur, one that makes clear that if he cannot achieve that fame fighting *with* Arthur, he will do so by fighting *against* him. And Mordred does, in fact, achieve this goal.

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[27] *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure.* Editor Larry D. Benson. Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS (consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages), 1994. ll. 676-679

[28] *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure* TEAMS. ll. 681-686

This very basic pattern of kin-trust and betrayal is found in Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Layamon's *Brut*, and the *Alliterative Morte.* Arthur may have been mistaken in judging Mordred's character based on that of Gawain, but he cannot be condemned for employing the logic of his time. This does not necessarily make him a bad king, and it certainly does not make him a bad man. Arthur's mistake is an honest one, the consequences of which are, however, gross but unpredictable. Though Arthur may have failed to perceive Mordred's true character, it is unlikely that he could have. Mordred's stewardship of the kingdom is an extreme circumstance, and one that produces extreme and largely unforeseeable actions from those under it. The underlying message in these stories is one of tragedy, where trust and loyalty equate to betrayal and destruction. According to Roger Sherman Loomis in *The Development of Arthurian Romances*, "the tragic ending is due to no fault of [Arthur's], no *harmatia*. Realistically considered, it is the result of Mordred's unforeseeable treason."[29] In contrast, the *Vulgate Cycle* elucidates a more complex version of human events, one that is principally defined by the convoluted machinations of the tripartite forces of divinity, character, and fortune at work in the world of the *Vulgate*. The distinction is important in order to grapple with such complexity. Unlike the English sources (except Malory, who is addressed independently), the *Vulgate* encompasses a significantly larger narrative scope, and thus offers a greater degree of character development. Yet character development includes the introduction of distinct character *flaws*, thus grafting a sense of human culpability on to the pervasive theme of fortune (more will be said about this later). Furthermore, character flaws and human culpability necessarily invoke the "retributive justice" of God, a force that is, as Loomis adeptly claims, "less clearly defined," yet undeniable present. As previously discussed, the circumstances of Mordred's conception set in

[29] Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance*.

motion the forces of God's punishment. Yet this punishment takes a long time to come to fruition. Mordred must first grow up, become a knight, and join the Round Table, all the while unaware of the greater role he will come to play. After this long period, and at the beginning of the *Vulgate*'s "Mort," the reader is introduced to a post-Grail Quest Camelot, yet not one that is exalted by adventure and success, but instead sickly and grieving for its lost companions. Thirty-two Knights of the Round Table have been lost on the Quest, all of whom, with the exception of Galahad and Perceval, had failed to complete the Quest successfully. Almost immediately, Sir Gawain's responsibility for the deaths of eighteen of those knights is brought to light, and he admits, "it did not come about through my chivalry, but through my sin"[30] By this Gawain means his unflagging pride, his impulse to seek martial prowess by any means, and the independent courage and daring of a knight errant. Yet these knightly qualities, when misguided, become the seeds of destruction— infighting, suspicion, and division— sown in Camelot, and it is within this context that the martial impulses of the Round Table knights are turned on one another. At this point in the Arthurian narrative, Camelot's external enemies and opportunities for adventure have largely disappeared, and by this, the very sinews binding the Round Table knights together are strained. When the boat carrying the body of the lady of Ascalot arrives at Camelot, Gawain says that, "if that boat is as beautiful inside as it is outside, it would be a marvel; it is almost as if adventures were beginning again" to which Arthur replies, "I was just about to say the same thing."[31] This lamentation appears to illustrate the knowledge among the knights that adventure, in the sense of noble quests to increase one's chivalry and prowess, have ended, and a great question of "what comes next" is looming. What will, and

[30] *Lancelot-Grail Vol. VIII.* p. 24

[31] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 92-93

does, happen are quarrels among the knights that ultimately lead to battles that cannot be labeled as "adventure," but instead take the form of a protracted descent into ruin and untimely death. Furthermore, Gawain had previously understood The lady of Ascalot to be Lancelot's lover, a fact he learned after an abortive attempt to woo her earlier in the story. Her death, as a result of Lancelot's unrequited love, serves to affirm rumors already circulating the court regarding Lancelot and Guinevere's adulterous liaisons, and forms an ominous premonition of impending division and strife. The exposure of Lancelot and Guinevere by Sir Aggravayne, Mordred's half-brother, is the final breaking point of the Round Table. However, as is typical of French Arthurian romances, Arthur himself is portrayed with less wisdom and political acuteness than their English counterparts. In the *Vulgate*, Arthur is told repeatedly that Lancelot and the queen are having an affair, but he does not believe it. First he sees paintings detailing the love affair in the castle of Morgan la Fay, who tells him they were painted by Lancelot while imprisoned there. Next, the king is told of the affair by Sir Aggravayne before the tournament at Winchester, at which Lancelot wore the sleeve of the Lady of Ascalot. Yet Arthur is assured by Gawain that Lancelot loves the lady of Ascalot, not the queen. Here Gawain is inadvertently made a liar through Lancelot's multifaceted deception. Finally, Aggravayne catches Arthur's attention while intentionally speaking loudly with his brothers about the affair. When Arthur commands him to repeat what he has said, Aggravayne refuses until Arthur threatens him with death. Only then does Aggravayne relent and tell the king. At first, this may seem like a savvy move on the part of Aggravayne to appear unwilling to fill the role of "bearer of bad news," and distance himself from the turmoil such news will cause, yet at this point in the narrative, Aggravayne has *already* related that information to the king, and was disregarded. It would seem that the only way to provoke Arthur to action in the matter was to inflame his anger *before* telling him the news. In

this way, the French *Vulgate* characterizes Arthur as a combination of passive and rash, being spurred to action by Aggravayne manipulating his emotions while being severely inattentive to the activities of his court, not only allowing him to be dishonored, but also to be the last one to find out about it. The *Vulgate* includes numerous instances for Arthur to discover the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, including instances when he is *explicitly told* about it, making Arthur's blindness toward that reality seem willful to the point of delusion.

It is in Arthur's loss of control over his vassals that the seeds of Mordred's forthcoming treachery are sown. Yet in the *Vulgate*, Mordred is fairly cautious and politic in joining sides against Lancelot. He follows his half-brother's inflammatory rhetoric by saying to the king, "So long as we hid it from you, we have also been disloyal and guilty of perjury; now we are freeing ourselves of the blame of that. We are telling you truthfully that it is as we say; now you must see how your dishonor can be avenged."[32] Mordred's speech here is not one that places blame solely on Lancelot or Guinevere, but also includes himself and his brothers in a larger circle of culpability that consist of those who committed the crime as well as those who kept it secret. Despite the previous attempts to warn Arthur of the affair, this is the first instance in which Arthur accepts the information. Mordred's speech here is not one of insincerity or of guile, so much as a scrupulous tempering of Aggravayne's aggressive speech. In the *Vulgate*, Mordred takes a rather politically savvy stance that shows him acting and speaking with a degree of moderation, not the aggression and belligerence typically associated with him. Mordred's speech and action throughout this episode in the *Vulgate* is fairly moderate and indirect. It does not appear as though he is seeking out trouble, but instead attempting to navigate a difficult

[32] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 110

social, political, and legal problem without placing himself directly into the center of the turmoil. It is worth stating here that Mordred at no point in the narrative appears to have any sort of overarching plan, in the sense that he does not participate in exposing Lancelot and Guinevere in order to cause war so that he can ultimately usurp Arthur's kingdom. While he does advise Arthur to wage war on Lancelot, he only recommends an attack on Joyous Garde, *not* a campaign into France.[33] In this context Mordred does not read as rash or belligerent, but seems to have a sincere interest in protecting his lord's honor. At this point in the narrative, it may be argued, his interest in this issue is greater than Arthur's. Lancelot, though a magnanimous and honorable knight, is a disruptive force in the feudal culture of Camelot; Lancelot may owe loyalty to Arthur, but he is not dependent on him. Ultimately, Lancelot has a country, a kingdom, and a people he may return to in France. Mordred does not, and must rely wholly on Arthur for honor and advancement. While Arthur is mired by indecision and inaction, Mordred seems actively trying to preserve his lord's honor, and by extension, his own. In fact, Mordred's role in exposing the affair seems to point to someone cautiously walking a thin line between loyalty to his half-brother and to his king. At this point in the narrative, Mordred has done nothing treacherous, aggressive, or deceitful. In fact, his behavior in the *Vulgate* is quite different from the characterization that Malory will come to employ in the *Morte Darthur*.

In the *Vulgate,* it is Guinevere who suspects ill of Mordred; when placed in Mordred's charge, she "knew such wickedness and disloyalty in him that she was sure that suffering and ill would come of it."[34] Yet it is not mentioned *why* she specifically feels this way about Mordred.

[33] Later, the campaign against Lancelot in France will become Sir Gawain's idea and undertaking.

[34] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 156

This returns us to the consistently frustrating reality of how little is said about Mordred in general. Mordred has not done anything explicitly treacherous at this point in the narrative, and thus Guinevere's feelings toward him are either an unfair prejudgment or based on information that the reader has not received. Both are distinctly possible, as Mordred's actions are typically shrouded in ambiguity. An example: when Guinevere is first to be burned at the stake for adultery, many knights are killed by Lancelot during his rescue, including Gareth, Gaheret, and Aggravayne (unlike in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, wherein Aggravayne dies at the queen's chamber door). Of the forty round table knights on the field that day, Sir Mordred and two other unmentioned knights are the only survivors, and it is Mordred who delivers the ill news to Arthur. Being one of only three knights to survive an attack by Lancelot may seem like a heroic feat of knightly ability, yet Mordred's actual performance in the battle is unmentioned, when the deeds of many other knights are written in great detail. In fact, Mordred's presence at the battle is only mentioned *after* the action had already occurred. It is equally plausible, based on such limited information, that Mordred's survival could have been the result of either great knightly prowess that somehow went unmentioned, or a treacherous act of cowardice, pretending to have been at the battle only after it was already over. Perhaps the author of the French *Vulgate* is practicing a type of selective omniscience, denying the reader key information about Mordred that other characters in the story might posses. It is possible that Guinevere saw Mordred acting disloyally at the battle, and thus based her negative opinion of him on that evidence. Arthur, on the other hand, not present at the battle, would therefore be unaware of such treachery. The narrative effect of such selective omniscience would be to place the reader alongside Arthur in a state of obliviousness toward the internal machinations of Camelot.

The *Vulgate* operates in a far more critical tone toward Arthur and his reign. If we may divide the knightly ethos of the Middle Ages into two interdependent and often contradictory philosophies, one being the warrior ethic, and the other being court behavior, then one may see how Arthur may be both successful and unsuccessful as a king. As a warrior Arthur is superb; he is capable of uniting and leading his fellow knights into battle, to defeat enemies and establish a kingdom. In this Arthur is unmatched, yet *maintaining* a kingdom is not his strong suit. As already mentioned, Arthur is particularly, even willfully, ignorant to the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. This ignorance extends to his treatment of Mordred. If Arthur did not have even the slightest inkling that Mordred might betray him, others within his court did. In the *Vulgate*, Mordred rather exuberantly volunteers to steward the kingdom when Arthur leaves for France. Arthur's understanding of Mordred's character seems to be as shrouded in ambiguity as the reader's, yet to simply take counsel from his queen and advisors may have altered his decision.

After Mordred is appointed to safeguard Arthur's kingdom, the *Vulgate*, unlike other sources, takes great care in detailing just how Mordred was able to usurp the crown. This is the only source that provides a detailed account of Mordred's motivation and psychology, beginning with the fact that Mordred "was so often with the queen that he fell in love with her and did not see how he could fail to die of love, if his desires were not satisfied."[35] The relationship between Guinevere and Mordred is perhaps the most varied aspect of the story across the entire Arthurian canon. One of the earliest mentions of Mordred comes from the Welsh triads, in which Mordred is listed as having "pulled Gwenhyfar out of her chair of state, and then he struck a blow upon

[35] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 160

her."[36] This abusiveness is not translated by Layamon in his *Brut*, but instead Guinevere and Mordred are consensual companions, both in romance and the usurping of Arthur's kingdom. Yet the French *Vulgate* makes their relationship terribly one-sided— Guinevere despises Mordred, while he is mortally love-struck. The interesting aspect of this section is that Mordred falls in love with the queen only *after* Arthur leaves, and before his writing of the falsified letter in which a dying Arthur commands his kingdom and, in particular, his queen into Mordred's care. In this way, the French *Mort* very closely links Mordred's desire for the kingdom with his desire for the queen to the extent that Guinevere appears to be the focus of his desire, and the kingdom only a close second.

A significant question regarding Mordred's usurpation of Arthur's kingdom is how, exactly, he was able to persuade the people and barons of Logres onto his side. In this matter, the sources once again differ. The *Vulgate* details how Arthur left his treasury in Mordred's control, a foolish move considering what the reader knows about Mordred, but not entirely without reason. In turn, Mordred summoned the barons of:

> Ireland and Scotland and the foreign countries that held lands from him. When they arrived he gave them such fine gifts that they were astonished, and he so cleverly won them over in that way that they promised themselves completely to him, and all said that nothing would prevent them from helping him against all men, even against King Arthur.[37]

There are three interesting points to be made about this section. The first is that it further illustrates Mordred's political weakness; his only means of garnering loyalty is by giving away *Arthur's* riches, and Mordred offers no other political merit of his own except a chance to take

[36] *The Romance of Arthur*. Expanded edition. Editor James J. Wilhelm. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994. p. 22

[37] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 195

revenge on Arthur. Second, many of the barons he appeals to are principally foreign leaders subjugated to Arthur's reign, and likely to already bear some enmity toward him. For example, the Saxon Barons "hated the king mortally. The highest barons of Saxony had turned towards Mordred and paid him homage, because they saw the opportunity for taking revenge on King Arthur for all the great harm he had done them in the past."[38] This second point is supported by the third, which is that the barons swear to defend Mordred against any man, including, oddly enough, Arthur himself, who all believe to be dead. Under these circumstances, it seems as though the oaths of the foreign barons are not so much of loyalty to Mordred, but *disloyalty* to Arthur, dead or alive. Thus, Mordred becomes a part of the Saxon invasion of England, the very thing which Arthur founds his knightly career upon.

The *Vulgate* does not convey the sense that the people of England actively supported Mordred's ascension to the throne. In fact, the people of London muster to prevent his reentry into the city once Arthur has returned to the country. Thus, Mordred's treachery becomes a particularly grotesque act: he is largely unsupported by the people of Britain, and forces his will by way of foreign mercenaries. Yet the significantly weakened state of the Round Table knights and Arthur's rule ensures that this is enough to usurp the kingdom. Mordred, in the *Vulgate*, is an ideologically weak ruler, but is sufficiently clever to achieve his immediate goals. He is also a martially unexceptional knight, but sufficiently capable of commanding immense forces. In Peter Korrel's *An Arthurian Triangle*, the author argues that to Mordred's credit, "he is as good an organizer and leader as Arthur."[39] Korrel is correct here, as it must be conceded that

[38] *The Death of Arthur*. Translator James Cable. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971. p. 208

[39] Korrel, Peter. *An Arthurian Triangle*. Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1984. p.126

Mordred does perform quite a feat in amassing such a large army in a relatively short period of time. What Mordred lacks in personal martial skill he appears to make up for in his skill as a large-scale battlefield commander.

His political and military maneuvers against Arthur are quick and adept, yet they are actions merely aimed at exploiting Arthur's particular weaknesses at this point in the story. The spirit of infighting amongst the Knights of the Round Table provides the proverbial "chinks in the armor" of Camelot which Mordred takes advantage of to his benefit, and his alone. It is highly unlikely that Mordred would have been able to challenge Arthur at any other point in the story, but that is an admitted speculation. What is significant here is that while Mordred is politically capable, his "reign" is backed by no strong ideology, only opportunism and the exploitation of weakness when Arthur's power is waning.

Sir Thomas Malory makes some editorial changes to the Arthur legend in his fifteenth century work *Le Morte Darthur*, and inserts a new level of philosophical ambiguity to Mordred's actions. This is a prototypical move for Malory, who consistently blurs the lines between the tripartite forces of fortune, character, and divine will. The result is a very *human* narrative realm; Malory seems to relish the mysteries of the human experience and keeping his readers searching for the "truth" and "meaning" behind the story.

Malory omits the knightly adventures of the young Mordred and moves him closer to, and more culpable for, the downfall of Camelot. Here Mordred is comparatively more unsophisticated and opportunistic, while simultaneously less politically savvy and chivalric. Compared to the narrative scope of Malory's entire *Morte Darthur*, Mordred's textual references

occupy a singularly minimal space, making him a painfully underdeveloped character. This also applies in comparing Mordred's textual space in Malory's *Morte* to his textual space compared to overall narrative scope in all the other sources. Taking the *Vulgate* as source material, Malory maintains the general narrative arc while deliberately omitting much of the explanatory substance of "the Frensshe source."[40] The tripartite forces at work in the conceptual world of the *Morte*, therefore, become considerably more shaded by ambiguity. While the *Vulgate* champions the role of divine will, and the pre-Malory English tradition espouses a sense of blind fortune, Malory's *Morte* confounds interpretation by stripping away virtually any decisive indication of how these forces are divided and how they work together. As a result, Mordred's actions often invite a plethora of uncertain interpretations. This is what makes Malory so fascinating: he takes a far more human stance in regard to his subjects, making their literary world is as realistically uncertain as our own. When Lancelot says that "Sir Mordred woll make trouble, for he ys passying envyous and applyeth hym muche to trouble."[41] The characterization that Malory *seems* to want to convey is that Mordred is by nature deceitful, belligerent, and disruptive. Yet this image of Mordred denies the very complex situation that he is in, a situation in which loyalties are strained and there is no clear sense of what is right and what is wrong. Furthermore, Lancelot's accusation is difficult to assess in that Lancelot, as Guinevere's lover, is himself at the center of the very deception that Mordred (and Aggravayne) are attempting to expose. Here, Lancelot is a highly unreliable judge; the "trouble" that he accuses Mordred of propagating is personally problematic for Lancelot, and under these circumstances cannot

[40] Malory's term

[41] Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur.* Editor Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. p. 671

necessarily be interpreted as an inherent character fault in Mordred. The convoluted web of deception, fault, and accusation skews the moral imperative of Malory's *Morte*. Compared to the *Vulgate*, Malory limits his explanation of this situation, for example, he omits Mordred's adroit speech regarding his culpability in concealing Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, as well as the exact wording of the false letter of Arthur death. Without these instances, readers of Malory's *Morte* know less about Mordred's motivations and mindset than those of the *Vulgate*. Ultimately, readers are left with only a limited understanding of this complicated situation, one that is akin to Lancelot's limited understanding as a character within the story. Therefore, a reader's conception of Mordred in Malory's *Morte* is filtered through, and shaped by, the hostile opinions of other characters. While these opinions are not necessarily wrong, they tend to have a smack of extremity to them because Malory's Mordred is so ambiguous and mysterious that he immediately lends himself to suspicion.

Yet Malory's Mordred is no devil. As a middling knight and politician, Mordred is ever the opportunist, and thus can only gain what fortune proffers him. Fortune extends to him a great opportunity to prey on internal discord in the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. However, though Mordred furthers the division between Arthur and Lancelot, even in this incident Mordred is neither mastermind nor instigator. Malory places blame elsewhere, for he claims that the "Morte Arthur— and that caused Sir Aggravayne,"[42] and that Aggravayne alone "awayted Quene Gwenyver and Sir Launcelot to put hem bothe to a rebuke and a shame."[43] Mordred seems to simply follow on the coattails of Sir Aggravayne. Though Malory indicates

[42] i.e. Aggravayne caused Arthur's death. (edition footnote). Malory, 645

[43] Malory, 644.

that both Aggravayne and Mordred "had ever a prevy hate unto the Queen,"[44] it is only Aggravayne who has the boldness to voice his quarrel. After openly charging Lancelot and Guinevere with adultery, Gawain, Gaherys, and Gareth refuse to "be knowyn of [Aggravayne's] dedis"[45] and in response, Mordred claims "than woll I!"[46]— his first utterance during the incident. To this Gawain retorts "I lyve you well… for ever unto all unhappyness ye woll graunt,"[47] indicating that even among his fellow knights at Camelot, Mordred's penchant for preying on others' weaknesses is well known. Yet he is still conveniently shielded from blame as instigator by Aggravayne during this council, as it is Aggravayne who speaks for them. When Gawain commands him to "stynte youre stryff,"[48] Malory writes "'that woll I nat,' seyde Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred."[49] To imagine that both knights are speaking in unison seems comical; Gawain is speaking to directly to Aggravayne, in response to what Aggravayne alone had said, and Aggravayne responds (in the singular), while Mordred seems to simply stand behind him, nodding in agreement. In a similar fashion, Aggravayne also appears to speak at Guinevere's door, as Malory writes that "ever stood Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred crying, 'Traytoure knight! Come forth out of the Queenys chamber!'"[50] Once again, it seems as though only one of the two is actually speaking, and since Aggravayne is consistently listed before Mordred, it appears to be him. It is not until threats are made and confrontation begins that

[44] Malory, 646.

[45] Malory, 646.

[46] Malory, 646.

[47] Malory, 646.

[48] Malory, 647.

[49] Malory, 647.

[50] Malory, 650.

Aggravayne and Mordred's will and voice become equal and entwined. In action, Mordred can no longer hide behind Aggravayne the way he can in rhetoric, and thus the "I" becomes "we." Yet even still, Aggravayne, as instigator, is the first at the Queen's door, and for that reason, he is the first to die at Lancelot's hand.

What is important about this incident is that while the other thirteen knights are killed, only Mordred escapes. This could readily be considered, along with his infantine survival at sea, as an instance of divine will interceding on Mordred's behalf in order to preserve him for a greater purpose. This instance could also be interpreted as an act of poor character in cowardice, as Mordred flees from combat in which his enemy has killed his companions. Perhaps this is a combination of both forces: God knows Mordred will flee to save his own life, so the villain is proffered an escape. There are a multitude of equally viable interpretations and this is far from shocking when analyzing Malory. Mirroring reality, the characters within the story have little time to evaluate this complex situation before having to grapple with its consequences. From this moment on, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is exposed, and Lancelot and Arthur are divided. The internal discord now ruling Camelot proffers Mordred a greater opportunity to prey on others' weakness.

Mordred is the leader of a rebellion against his father, but in Malory, he has little political skill, no idealistic platform, and ultimately, no real plan. By this point in the narrative, Lancelot is at odds with Arthur and Gawain, splitting the once-powerful unity of Camelot. In this chaos and confusion, Mordred forges letters stating that Arthur had been killed and convinces his parliament to crown him king. Malory, unlike the *Vulgate*, does not include the contents of the letter, or how Mordred convinced the parliament to make him king, Malory states

only that "he made them."[51] Presumably, this decision was made in the absence of a readily available alternative. It cannot be assumed that Mordred convinced them through any kind of personal or political savvy, as his characterization in the *Morte* consistently denies this interpretation. Of course, Sir Thomas Malory's own historical context within the War of the Roses provides much of the editorial background of the story, and demand to be addressed.

The War of the Roses was a time of internal strife and bloodletting in England, marked by aristocratic maneuvering for power, shifting allegiances, and relentless warfare. The salient issues of noble legitimacy and right-to-rule inform much of Malory's commentary within the *Morte*. It is certainly not the first Arthurian work to be used, at least in part, as a vehicle for discussing relevant socio-political matters, as Layamon and Geoffrey make Mordred an extension of Vortigern's disastrous plan to invite Saxon mercenaries to Britain for military aid, only to find them later becoming permanent settlers. Yet Malory is interested in the issues of loyalty and civil war within a medieval society. *Le Morte Darthur* is the only Arthurian work in which it appears as though Mordred's usurpation is widely accepted by the political hierarchy of Britain. Malory claims that the English barons had a "comyn voyce amonge them that with Kynge Athur was never othir lyff but warre and stryff, and with Sir Mordrede was grete joy and blysse."[52] Malory takes this moment in the story to disengage from his subject for a rare moment of editorial interjection to comment on the fickle nature of political loyalties, past and present, stating that, "Alas, thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thynge us

[51] Malory, 679.

[52] Malory, 680

please no terme."[53] Of course, Malory has the benefit of retrospect and a strong bias toward his protagonist. On a purely practical level, though, the English barons are not entirely amiss in their feelings. Arthur has been greatly heeled to the will of over-mighty subjects, namely Lancelot and Gawain, whose blood-feud Arthur is unwilling or even incapable of halting, plunging the kingdom into greater warfare. Thus, drawn into a conflict on French soil, Arthur is an absentee ruler along with his most illustrious knights- leaving a substantial void in justice and security in Britain. At this point the usurpation of Arthur's throne seems almost inevitable, rather than tragic. What is tragic is that the barons who saw nothing but "warre and stryff" with Arthur are not necessarily incorrect in thinking that way, but they certainly are in believing Mordred's promise of peace. Yet to reiterate, Malory's remarks are greatly shaded by the benefit of hindsight and in that sense, somewhat sanctimonious. What he makes clear in his commentary is that changeable political allegiances are a corruptive force in government and that loyalty is a high, if not the highest, quality of a knight.

But loyalty is not a strong quality in Mordred, as his usurpation of Arthur's kingdoms readily indicates. His power-grab extends beyond just land and title, and it seems that Mordred wants to posses everything of Arthurs, including his wife. After Guinevere escapes to the Tower of London rather than be married to him, Mordred decides that the best manner of persuasion is to besiege the tower.[54] This narrative element is borrowed from the *Vulgate*, in which it is an almost comically misguided attempt at wooing her. Here, Malory takes his typically ambiguous stance, choosing not to indicate how Mordred felt about Guinevere, claiming only that he "seyde

[53] Malory, 680

[54] Malory, 679

playnly that he wolde wedde her."[55] There is no hint of love in the *Morte Darthur*, and Guinevere is simply another possession of Arthur's that Mordred tries to seize. In this sense, the *Morte* once again points out Mordred's lack of political and interpersonal savvy in his decision to besiege the tower as the best means of persuasion.[56] Malory's strength as a writer is in shaping a narrative that challenges his readers' expectations and force them to repeatedly reconsider their interpretations of the story. There are few, if any, moral absolutes to be found in the *Morte*, and in my personal experience, finding one is often the result of inattention to detail.[57]

## IV. The Final Battle and the Role of Fortune

By the time Arthur returns to his kingdom, the stage has been set for a monumental confrontation between him and his usurping steward. Yet as previously mentioned, this conflict will come to encompass the entire martial class of the kingdom as well as no small quantity of ordinary peoples. Indeed, the conflict between Mordred and Arthur is only the most prominent rupturing of Camelot's former peace. The pre-Malory British sources of Layamon's *Brut*, Geoffrey's *History*, and the Alliterative *Morte* extend the conflict well across international borders as Mordred recruits the rebellious Saxon forces formerly subordinated to Arthur's rule. In these sources Mordred is left as steward while Arthur campaigns on the European continent against the Roman commander Lucius. A message regarding the limits of power is subtly conveyed here: Arthur's foreign conquests have made his kingdom a large, but unruly, collection of disparate peoples whose loyalties are tenuous at best. In the *Brut*, Arthur claims that, "I will

[55] Malory, 679

[56] Malory, 679

[57] For example, Lancelot's acidic characterization of Mordred, discussed previously, is believable until one considers Lancelot's concurrent deception.

rule the unruly Romans!"[58] This prompts the author to editorially lament that: "all this vaunting was quite futile, for it turned out otherwise."[59] The language employed in this instance is worth further examination. Arthur's "vaunt" may appear as vain hubris, but Arthur does, in fact, defeat the Romans. He does not, however, foresee the usurpation of his kingdom by Mordred. Layamon's editorializing here is a retrospective comment on Arthur's ill fortunes that will unfold later in the story. The vaunt was "futile" only in respect to later events which, "turned out otherwise." Layamon is speaking here about the unpredictable and mercurial nature of "fortune."

Fortune is the last of the tripartite forces identified by Roger Loomis, with which much of this essay is concerned. Divine "retributive justice" and human character have been discussed in relation to Mordred's conception and his usurpation of the kingdom, respectively. The battle between Mordred and Arthur is the mortal climax that will bring their story to its close. When Arthur returns to his kingdom, diplomacy has ended, the stakes have been set, and "the gloves have come off," so to speak. War is the only solution— under the knightly ethos, neither Mordred nor Arthur can back down without losing prowess. The chaos of warfare is the realm of chance and uncertainty, where boasts meet blades and fortune holds its strongest jurisdiction. Before addressing specific textual references, however, a few general points must be made about the medieval conception of "fortune" and how it differs from the forces previously discussed. The concept of human character is based on moral virtues that while frequently ambiguous, are nonetheless a comprehensible reality with tangible consequences. Divine justice, on the other

[58] Layamon. *Brut*. Edition and Translation by W.J.R. Barron and S.C. Weinberg. New York: Longman Publishing, 1995. ll. 13922

[59] Layamon. ll. 13922-24

hand, is an abstract concept also plagued by ambiguity, and while it lacks the tangibility of character, it is at least *perceived* to be existent. Furthermore, while divine justice is often beyond human comprehensibility, the individual may find comfort in the belief that God will act in accordance to a plan of righteousness, and even to intervene in their favor. Fortune, however, is the most problematic of these three forces; fortune is a completely abstract concept that passively fills the gaps in human understanding: when one cannot find any rationale for whatever has occurred, fortune must be to blame. Unlike God, and human beings for that matter, fortune has no inherent agency, no personal agenda, and no moral structure. Even the image of "Lady Fortuna" is merely a visual representation of a strictly abstract concept. In the French *Vulgate* and Malory's *Morte* she appears in Arthur's dreams, utterly blind, holding a wheel to which all beings are mercilessly fixed (there will be more said about Arthur's dreams later). The wheel spins, bringing some up while others fall, and while Lady Fortuna holds the wheel, she does not control it, nor cares to. Fortune's ambiguous parameters make it impossible to separate from other forces at work. The frequent incomprehensibility of divine will often leads to its confusion with blind fortune, and quite frankly, it is impossible to divide two forces largely beyond human understanding. Frequently, Fortune is evoked by characters in order to skew responsibility for the delayed and/or odious consequences of their character and actions. In the Alliterative *Morte*, when Mordred kills his brother Gawain in battle, it is stated that, "weeping, he went away, and cursed the hour/ That fate had fashioned him for such destruction."[60] While it is uncertain what exactly he means by "fate" (whether fortune or divine will), it is clear that Mordred does not understand or accept his culpability for the present circumstances, and his blaming of "fate" is unsurprising. The Mordred of the Alliterative *Morte*, specifically, was "forced" into accepting

[60] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. Editor John Gardner. Southern Illinois University Press, 1971. ll.3887-9.

the stewardship after beseeching Arthur to take him on campaign. But he was in no way forced to usurp the kingdom, at least not in any logical sense. I have stated that Mordred, in this text, will fight with Arthur, even if it is *against* him, but this is by no means a sound rationale for usurpation, and certainly does not excuse his fratricide. Furthermore, claiming that fate had "fashioned" him for this purpose implies that fortune has an agenda, which is contrary to its conception. Ultimately, it is Mordred's character and actions that determine his present circumstances, and it is character that Loomis maintains is the "overriding" force in the Arthurian literatures.

## The Final Battle

In Geoffrey's *Kings of Britain,* Arthur makes a hasty return from the continent to his usurped kingdom. Encountering Mordred's army at Richborough, Arthur's men "drove Mordred and his army before them in flight and inflicted great slaughter on them in return. Profiting from their long experience in warfare, they drew up their troops most skillfully."[61] Arthur is victorious in this initial battle, but Mordred escapes to re-form his army near Winchester. Another battle is joined outside the city, and Mordred is defeated. He takes flight, having "made no arrangements whatsoever for the burial of his dead."[62] This indicates not only the gravity of Mordred's collapsing command, but also his poor quality as knight and leader. As a result of this second escape, Arthur "was filled with great mental anguish,"[63] and pursues the traitor to Camblam, where the final battle takes place. Geoffrey has nothing to say about prophecy or

[61] Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Translator Lewis Thorpe. Baltimore: Penguin, 1966. p. 259.

[62] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 259

[63] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 259

divine will— this is a battle between men, and fortune seems to determine the outcome. Both Mordred and Arthur are hedging their bets on the strengths of their respective forces: Mordred, with his large army of "raw recruits who were totally inexperienced in war,"[64] compared to Arthur's force of "valiant men…who were veterans of many battles."[65] While the two commanders rally their forces, "the lines of battle suddenly met, combat was joined, and they all strove with might and main to deal each other as many blows as possible."[66] Geoffrey's "Battle at Camblam" is a particularly violent affair, as he indicates by its explosive beginning and vicious ending. After "many thousands" had died, Arthur's men "charged at the squadron where…Mordred was. They hacked a way through with their swords… It was at this point that the accursed traitor was killed."[67] It is not explicitly stated whether or not Arthur himself killed Mordred, and in Geoffrey's *Kings of Britain* it is not particularly important that he does. In later versions of the tale, the struggle between Arthur and Mordred is a far more personal affair in which the narrative demands that they co-terminate (more will be said about this later). However, after Mordred is killed that battle at Camblan is not over. Mordred's foreign forces muster and continue the battle "fiercer than ever,"[68] which substantiates that point stated previously, that is, that these foreign forces were far more interested in fighting *against* Arthur, rather than *for* Mordred. Mordred's ill fortune is in hedging his bets on an inexperienced foreign army with an agenda that is not entirely congruent with his own. Ultimately, both armies are

[64] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 260

[65] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 260

[66] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 260-61

[67] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 261

[68] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 261

largely depleted by the struggle and Arthur "mortally wounded" before he was "carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to."[69] This is where Geoffrey ends his story of Arthur, though the *History of the Kings of Britain* continues. The Isle of Avalon is not an explicitly magical place, nor is there any prophetic indication of Arthur's future return. The story ends on a very human note; Arthur and Mordred were men whose characters and fortunes ruled the separate outcomes of their mutual story. Later authors of Arthurian literature will adapt and build upon Geoffrey's account.

Layamon, in his *Brut,* is one such author. Though he maintains a story-line similar to Geoffrey's, in respect to the final battle, Layamon adds a "prophetic" dream had by Arthur before the struggle begins. When Mordred has usurped the crown, but before Arthur knows of it, Arthur has a dream in which he is seated in a large hall, then "Mordred came marching up with a vast host, bearing in his hand a stout battleaxe. He began to hew with great vigour and cut through all the posts which supported the hall."[70] Mordred and Guinevere tear down the dream-hall, and Arthur is "left standing upon a hill," where he sees, as related by Arthur himself:

> …griffins and hideous birds. Then there came roaming across the hills a golden lion, the most noble beast our Lord created. The lion came running towards me and seized me by the waist, and made off, moving towards the sea. And I saw the sea-waves surging; and the lion went with me into the water. Once we two were in the sea the waves parted us; then a fish came swimming by and bore me to the land. I was all wet and weary then, sick with sorrow.[71]

[69] Geoffrey of Monmouth. p. 261

[70] Layamon. p. 241

[71] Layamon. p. 241

The bizarre surrealism of this dream is worth pausing over. Arthur interprets the dream as prophetic, as he claims that "I know with certainty that all my happiness has ended."[72] Yet the messenger to whom he relates the dream cautions him otherwise, answering that "one should never interpret dreams ominously," he continues by stating that "if it *should* (my italics) have happened… that Mordred has seized your queen and taken into his own possession your entire kingdom…still you might fittingly avenge yourself by force of arms."[73] What is curious about this discourse is that the man to whom Arthur is speaking already knows that Mordred has usurped the kingdom, as he is the messenger sent to deliver that very news. Arthur's dream has related to him, however abstractly, the outcome of the story before he even knows it. Yet one might conclude that such a dream is not "prophetic," but instead the manifestation of Arthur's troubled mind, having been so far away from queen and kingdom for so long, and the fact that his dream is (loosely) representative of reality may be regarded as mere coincidence. The messenger's statement against interpreting dreams "ominously," may, of course, simply be his way of encouraging Arthur to not lose hope. What one cannot conclude from this scene, however, is that medieval peoples always put great stock in "reading the omens" of dreams. Though it was a common medieval practice, this instance at least indicates that the debate was open on the "prophecies" of dreams.

Once Arthur returns to his kingdom, there is, as in Geoffrey's version, a series of battles leading to the final battle at Camblan (called *Camelford* in Layamon's account). First, at an

[72] Layamon. p. 241

[73] Layamon. p. 243

unnamed beach, where Gawain is killed "by a Saxon earl,"[74] and Mordred's army is defeated before he takes flight. Mordred attempts to take refuge at London, where, to his ill-luck, the citizens "denied entry to him and his followers."[75] Layamon's Mordred, versus Geoffrey's, is a far more desperate character at this point in the story. Layamon includes this instance to show just how thin Mordred's domestic support was and how his army is composed almost entirely of foreign forces. The author thus draws Mordred into greater culpability for the Saxon domination of Britain that begins with the fall of Arthur, which in turn amplifies the British nationalism ascribed to the Arthurian tradition. To augment this point, the author then relates that "Arthur sent messengers throughout his whole kingdom commanding the presence of all those living in the land who were fit to bear weapons… riding and marching, a vast company flocked to the host like falling snow."[76] The struggle between Mordred and Arthur in Layamon's *Brut* is more deeply politicized than any other text: Arthur is a champion of Breton nationalism, while Mordred represents the scourge of foreign domination. This paradigm is just as likely to resonate with Bretons living under Saxon rule as Layamon's English readership under Norman rule.

But let us now return to the story: after Mordred escapes the first battle and is turned away from London, he takes refuge in Winchester, which Arthur besieges until the entire town is destroyed. Absent from this battle, yet unknown to his men, is Mordred. His soldiers all perish thinking they are fighting for (and *with*) their leader, who has merely used them as a cover for his escape. Finally Mordred and his remaining army are cornered at Camelford where the final

[74] Layamon. p. 247

[75] Layamon. p. 247

[76] Layamon. p. 253

battle is joined. The outcome of the battle is largely relegated to fortune by Layamon, as he claims that "no one could distinguish any warrior, nor see who did well nor ill, so confused was the mêlée, for each, were he squire or knight, fought fiercely."[77] This is a battle of such ferocious confusion that no room is left for personal prowess or individual grudges, it is a battle of virtual extermination, in which victory goes to him who has the luck to be the last man standing. That man is not Mordred. He is killed, yet as in Geoffrey's account, not explicitly by Arthur. Arthur, also, is "grievously, mortally wounded."[78] Unlike Geoffrey, however, Arthur's removal to Avalon is a far more fantastical affair. The dying Arthur claims that:

> I will go to Avalon, to the loveliest of all women, to the queen Argante, fairest of fairy women; and she shall make me well of all my wounds, make me whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will return to my kingdom and dwell with the Britons in great contentment."[79]

Arthur is unclear as to whether promised return will be immediate, insomuch as he will be healed and returned to his kingdom, or if he will return at some future date, immortalized and messiah-like. Layamon coyly circumvents explication in the matter, stating only that, "the Britons yet believe that he is alive, and… still await the time when Arthur will come again… to aid the people of England."[80] In Layamon's *Brut,* Arthur is a deeply politicized symbol of Breton nationalism and this ending serves his purpose well. Unlike Geoffrey's Arthur, who dies and is frozen in time, Layamon's vague promise of a future return ensures that Arthur continues in the British collective memory as an active patron of their nationalistic interests.

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[77] Layamon. p. 253

[78] Layamon. p. 253

[79] Layamon. p. 255

[80] Layamon. p. 255

The author of the *Alliterative Morte* explicitly names the *Brut* as source material, and maintains a very similar narrative trajectory while adding a multitude of intriguing details. Important among these is the markedly flattering depiction of Arthur throughout: his wisdom, virtue, worthiness, and nobility. While these superlatives are related by the author, the character of Arthur within the story appears to have internalized an aggrandized sense of self-worth that borders on hubris, for example stating that he "shall soon be overlord of all the earth"[81] after defeating the Romans. A peculiar rhetorical feature employed by the author of the *Alliterative Morte* is using collective pronouns to refer to Arthur and the Round Table Knights (*our* king, *our* forces, etc.), which causes readers to identify more personally with Arthur. The effect of such a device is the general dulling of the readerships' critical faculties toward the central character. In the *Alliterative Morte,* Arthur is a far more boastful character, and one may even go so far as to claim that he views himself as a second Christ when Arthur proclaims to his men in battle, "Would that God on high would destine by his will/ That I should be judged today and should die for you all!"[82] This is an extreme reading— Arthur may have simply expressed this rather tender sentiment to encourage his men and it is not clearly expressed that he saw himself as a messiah figure. However, the Arthur of this story is a clearly self-aggrandizing character with little sense of human limitations.

That is not to say however, that Arthur was not warned of such limitations. Arthur's "prophetic" dream in the *Alliterative Morte* are thoroughly described by the author as well as clearly explicated by Arthur's "philosophers" within the story. After battling the Romans, but

[81] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 3210.

[82] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 4156-57.

before returning to Britain, Arthur has a dream in which he walks through a terrible forest of wolves, swine, lions, and other "wicked beasts," before encountering Lady Fortuna and her Wheel. On the Wheel are fixed many kings, some of whom are rising, while others lay broken and dejected, having been crushed by the wheel's revolutions. Each relates to Arthur an ominous message about the corruptions of power, wealth, and beauty. Lady Fortuna fixes Arthur to the wheel and succors him with fruit and wine in abundance, telling him that:

> Well may you worship my will, as you know well,
> And more than all other great men that were ever on earth;
> All your worship in war you've won by my will,
> For I have been friendly, man, and helped against others.[83]

Shortly thereafter, the Lady of Fortune tells Arthur that "Now you shall lose this game, and your life soon after;/ You have lived in all delight and lordship too long"[84] before turning her wheel and crushing Arthur "to pieces." Contrary to the cautious messenger of Layamon's *Brut*, Arthur's "philosophers" in the *Alliterative Morte* interpret this dream as an explicit and direct omen of the near-future. They implore him to cease his course, absolve himself, and "prepare for [his] end."[85] More so than the other sources, the *Alliterative Morte* makes a heavy investment in fortune as a determining factor in human events. Yet also heavily emphasized is the concept of inescapable human limitations, as the aggrandizing Arthur believes he is capable of, and deserving of, total world domination. Arthur's "misfortune," then, is not realizing when

[83] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 3339-3342.

[84] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 3385-86.

[85] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 3399

his authority has stretched too thin. This is a message the Arthur of the *Alliterative Morte* never truly understands; even when his domestic power is usurped by Mordred, Arthur still believes he is capable of avenging the treachery. Certainly, there is no reason why Arthur should believe he is *not* capable of such action, but he fails to realize his initial mistake nonetheless: he created an "empire" too fast, over too large a territory. Arthur's "empire" building in this text is like the baking an over-large loaf of bread: crumbling on the outside, while the center remains soft.

Once Arthur returns to Britain, the sequence of battles in the *Alliterative Morte* is fairly rapid and direct. As in Geoffrey and Layamon, an initial battle occurs when Arthur's army first makes landfall, during which Sir Gawain is killed. Yet the author pays more attention to the personal details of the battle: in this text Gawain encounters Mordred and a brutal battle between the two brothers ends with a mortal hand to hand grappling. Gawain's hand slips as he attempts to grab for his knife, giving Mordred the opportunity to kill his brother. Mordred then leaves the battle, cursing his "misfortune" at having been forced to kill Gawain or die himself, yet as mentioned previously, Mordred has caused this chain of events by his own action. Blaming Fortune is merely his attempt to eschew responsibility. Arthur's reaction to the loss of Gawain and the failed attempt to defeat Mordred is one of sheer anger to the extent that "none of his liege men would look King Arthur in the eye,/ So fiery was his look…"[86] The Arthur of the *Alliterative Morte* is decidedly war-like, he is capable of degrees of aggression and wrath which are unique to this text. Arthur thus pursues Mordred's destruction in a far more personal manner than previous texts and after a brief interlude, the forces meet for their final battle. In the *Alliterative Morte*, this battle is severely mismatched, with Arthur's eighteen-hundred men

[86] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 4049-50.

versus Mordred's sixty-thousand man force of foreign mercenaries. However, these numbers seem rather unimportant considering that the battle quickly becomes an explicitly personal affair between Mordred and Arthur. When Arthur spies Mordred wielding "Clarent," the sword used for formal coronations, he flies into a rage, stating that "no one knew of its place but Guinevere herself."[87] Thus, Clarent becomes a symbol of his betrayal by both vassal *and* wife. In a moment charged with symbolism, the enraged Arthur severs from Mordred both the sword and the arm wielding it. Not only is Mordred deprived of the instrument of warfare, but also the physical means to use it. Of course, before his death Mordred was able to strike a fatal blow on Arthur, who dies shortly thereafter. No maidens from Avalon materialize, no prophecy of a future return is hinted at. In the *Alliterative Morte* Arthur is a man, no more, no less. He rose by good fortune and fell by the same means, subjected to the socially equalizing machinations of Fortune's Wheel.

The French *Vulgate* displays a similar narrative arc in a different thematic context. Unlike the infidelity between Guinevere and Mordred present in the pre-Malory English sources, the Guinevere of the *Vulgate* is staunchly opposed to Mordred as both a king and husband, and it is she who sends word to Arthur alerting him to the treachery unfolding in his kingdom. As previously mentioned, Mordred's near-crippling romantic obsession with Guinevere makes her, and not the kingdom, his primary object of desire. Therefore, his usurpation in the *Vulgate* is a rather hasty affair, and, in fact, it seems almost as if Mordred was so fixed on Guinevere that Arthur's return simply "slipped his mind." He then empties Arthur's coffers in order to buy the patronage of foreign barons to support in his defense. Yet unlike the proud, wrathful, and

[87] *Alliterate Morte Arthure*. ll. 4203.

aggressive Arthur of the previously discussed sources, this Arthur returns sick at heart, finally aware of the crumbling situation within his kingdom. This awareness is embodied in the rapidly-expiring Sir Gawain, previously wounded by Sir Lancelot and, the author claims, "It was that grief, more than any other, that struck at his heart; it was that grief that denied him rest night and day."[88]

In the events leading up to the final battle, Arthur receives a plethora of ominous portents. The first, and most subtle, of which is the example of Gawain, who repents his "foolishness," and laments his "cruel treatment"[89] of Lancelot. Gawain has followed the knightly ethos to a belligerent extreme while pursuing a personal grudge that has only led to the further unraveling of Camelot and his own destruction. Yet before death, Gawain wishes only for reconciliation, absolution, and peace. The death of Gawain is a foreshadowing of Arthur's own impending death— they parallel one another in that both men find themselves locked in a personal struggle of power and pride, which, in the highly Christianized context of the *Vulgate* is explicitly corruptive. Whether or not Arthur perceives the parallels between himself and Gawain is uncertain, but the despairing and increasingly fatalistic Arthur sees no alternative to his present course. Gawain's example and pleas go unheard. Yet even after death Gawain appears to Arthur in a dream, surrounded by "a crowd of poor people" who claim that "we have won the house of God for Sir Gawain, your nephew, because of the great good he has done for us: do as he did and you'll be acting wisely."[90] The message is perfectly tuned to the *Vulgate*'s explicitly Christian themes of humility, repentance, and good works. Gawain, humbled and absolved of sin before

[88] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 146.

[89] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 146.

[90] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 149.

his death, was permitted into heaven on the credit of his former good deeds. Gawain's dream-message for Arthur is thus: "Sir, don't do battle with Mordred; if you do, you'll die or be mortally wounded."[91] This message is nothing less than direct; Arthur certainly understands, and accepts, that his life is at stake, but he fails to understand the threat his *soul* is also under. Thus, he replies that "I most certainly will fight him, even if I die as a result: for I'd be a coward not to defend my land against a traitor."[92] This discourse illuminates a central tension in the knightly paradigm of the *Vulgate* in that Arthur must weigh "the warrior code," i.e., his honor and pride, against a Christian ethos, as well as his life and soul. The constant friction between these different codes is an inherent tragedy of the *Vulgate*. Neither Arthur nor Gawain is incorrect in assessing the situation and consequences thereof, but they are speaking from two divergent ethical systems. The "dream of Gawain" appears specifically designed to imply that redemption is still attainable for Arthur. Yet Arthur rejects the message and is propelled into another dream in which Lady Fortune delivers an even more direct warning. She tells Arthur as he is seated atop her wheel that "you have been the most powerful king who ever was. But such are the effects of earthly pride that no one is so highly placed that he can avoid falling from worldly power."[93] Lady Fortune in the *Vulgate* is nothing like her blind and uncaring counterpart of the early English sources. The primacy of "earthly pride" in her speech makes her more akin to divine retributive justice than previous conceptions of "Fortune." The overtly Christian *Vulgate* makes a heavy narrative investment in espousing the nature of the relationship between man and God, and this conceptually prohibits exploring the concept of pure Fortune. In a general sense,

[91] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 149.

[92] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 149.

[93] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 150.

the *Vulgate* is a "salvation history" with an embedded agenda of spiritual education. While Arthur is not necessarily a "bad" man, he is a highly flawed character who is just as susceptible to worldly corruptions as anyone.

Arthur's portentous dreams are interpreted to him, not by a mere messenger or "philosopher," but by an archbishop and the fact that it is a "man of God" is significant in the *Vulgate*, as it endorses the visions as divine will. As if the dreams were not straightforward enough, the archbishop advises Arthur to abandon his current course once again. Furthermore, he takes Arthur to the Salisbury Plain to see an inscription on a rock reading: "THIS PLAIN WILL BE THE SITE OF THE TERRIBLE BATTLE BY WHICH THE KINGDOM OF LOGRES WILL BE ORPHANED."[94] The archbishop explains that "Merlin himself wrote these words, and everything he has ever said has been true, for he knows what will happen in the future."[95] The archbishop has thus attributed Merlin (who is often employed as a symbol of Celtic mysticism) with an explicitly Christian function within the story, as the archbishop's endorsement of the prophecy identifies Merlin, at least implicitly, an agent of divine communication. It is a boon to modern readers that elements more familiar to a pagan worldview— those which may be called "soothsaying" and "reading the augers"— were not abandoned by the *Vulgate* author(s), but instead employed in a new and intriguing way within an explicitly Christianized text. Arthur's response to these divine omens is difficult to understand, as he claims that "I will never leave until Our Lord has given victory to me or to Mordred; and if

[94] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 150.

[95] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 150.

I come to harm, it will be because of my sin and my own failure."[96] In the face of such ominous portents, Arthur's confidence is understandably shaken, and this is one of few moments in which he displays an acute awareness of his "sin" and "failure." It is a sad lament, but Arthur has either failed to comprehend, or willfully ignored, the spiritual impetus of his dreams and instead remains fixated on worldly concerns.

The next day, the final "Battle of the Salisbury Plains" (synonymous with Camblan or Camelford) is begun. The author spends a great deal of text on details of the battle that are irrelevant here, because Arthur and Mordred are virtually unmentioned until only a handful of tired and wounded knights remain. When Mordred kills a knight named Sagremor, Arthur cries, "Oh, God, why do you permit my prowess to be so abased? For the sake of that blow, I vow to God that either Mordred or I must die!"[97] This vaunt is ironic in retrospect, because *both* men will die. However, Arthur appears prepared to beat, or meet, his destiny as it was related by the preceding omens, and in this sense it is a cathartic moment. For Arthur, as well as the reader, this final vow signals the end of the heartrending dissolution of the Round Table and while it is not a joyful finish, it is, nonetheless, some form of closure. Building off the precedent of the *Alliterative Morte*, the combat between Arthur and Mordred is intensely personal and one-on-one. However, when Arthur strikes the "killing blow" against Mordred, the *Vulgate* adds that "when the lance was withdrawn, a ray of sunlight shone through the wound… and the people of that country say that it was a sign of Our Lord's wrath."[98] This moment appears to signify a spiritual rectification of human wrongs within the *Vulgate*'s framework of Christian theology

[96] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 150.

[97] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 154.

[98] *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation, Vol. IV.* p. 154.

and divine will. Why the author(s) chose not to *explicitly* endorse this view, and instead cautiously state that "the people…say that it was a sign," is peculiar, but perhaps the author felt that after such lengthy sermonizing, the mere statement of fact was sufficient to make his point. During this struggle Arthur is, of course, mortally wounded. It is worth noting, however, that Arthur never dies *within* the text of the *Vulgate*: he is transported to the Isle of Avalon, then Sir Girflet finds his tomb three days later. The Christian allusion is inescapable, and implies Arthur's salvation through courageous death despite his all too human flaws in life and conveys, without overtly stating, the possibility of Arthur's future return.

In regard to the final battle in the *Morte Darthur*, Malory follows his typical schema of borrowing heavily from previous Arthurian narratives, recombining them in intriguing ways, and inserting his unique brand of ambiguity. Malory weaves the tripartite forces of character, fortune, and divine will into a constantly confounding, but ultimately candid view of human events. As Arthur returns to Britain following the usurpation, Mordred, in Britain, is approached by the Bishop of Canterbury who asks him "ys nat Kynge Arthur youre uncle, and no farther but youre modirs bother, and upon her he hymselffe begate you, upon hys owne syster? Therefore how may ye wed youre owne fadirs wyff?"[99] This question is aimed directly at the central tension of the Arthur-Mordred relationship in Malory's *Morte*—that is, Mordred's incestuous genesis. Throughout the narrative, Malory has placed Mordred in circumstances wherein readers may logically expect him to be a device of divine will. Considering the infant Mordred's providential escape from death as one of the "May-Day" babies, and his fortunate survival at Guinevere's door, it may appear as though Mordred is being preserved by divine will for a

[99] Malory, 679.

greater purpose. In essence, Mordred's role in the narrative frequently *appears* as if he is the one charged by divine will to rectify Arthur's sin by destroying him. Yet being an instrument of God does not make him righteous or heroic, and the dialogue between Mordred and the Archbishop highlights this issue, exposing Mordred's offenses and showing him unrepentant for them. Mordred threatens the Archbishop with death for his intervention and is excommunicated in return. Thus, Mordred and Arthur are both guilty of sin and neither is occupying the moral high-ground. The unanticipated is prototypical of Malory: he sets up readers' expectations only to subvert them at critical moments. Once Arthur returns, he lands at Dover and repels the attacking forces, forcing Mordred to flee. Before the next battle, Arthur dreams of a:

> "chayre…faste to a whele, and thereupon sat Kynge Arthure in the richest clothe of golde that myght be made. And the Kynge thought there was undir hym, farre from hym, an hydeous depe blak water, and therein was all maner of serpentis and wormes and wylde bestis, fowle and orryble. And suddenly the Kynge thought that the whyle turned up-so-downe, and he felle amonge the serpentes, and every beste toke hym by a lymme"[100]

One must assume this to be the "Wheel of Fortune," adapted from previous texts— however, the symbol is never explicitly named, and Lady Fortuna does not appear, nor any ancient kings with philosophical messages. The "Wheel of Fortune," as employed by Malory, is a highly macabre and blatantly hellish depiction of Arthur's forthcoming destruction. Yet without the overt moralizing that one may find in the *Alliterative Morte* or the *Vulgate,* it is difficult to surmise what message Arthur is meant to draw from the dream. Similar to Layamon's *Brut*, the reader, as well as the characters within the story, may just as readily interpret this dream as a manifestation of Arthur's troubled psyche, or as a genuine metaphysical communication. Once

[100] Malory, 683.

again, this ambiguity appears to be deliberately constructed by the author and is a quintessential aspect of his narrative style.

In a second dream, Arthur is visited by the apparition of the recently departed Gawain, who warns him that he will be defeated unless he postpones the battle and waits for the aid of Sir Lancelot. More so than the *Vulgate* (the source material from which Malory drew this scene), the "Dream of Gawain" in Malory's *Morte* contains a more explicitly divine message. Gawain claims that:

> And for the grete grace and goodnes that All-myghty Jesu hath unto you, and for pyté of you and many mo other good men there shall be slayne, God hath sente me to you of Hys speciall grace to gyff you warnyng that in no wyse ye do batayle as tomorne, but that ye take a tretyse for a moneth-day.[101]

While the general schema of this dream-sequence is unchanged from the *Vulgate*, the rhetoric employed by Malory is unique. Unlike the message of "cease warring and repent" found in the *Vulgate*, the message found here is simply "wait." Malory's *Morte* lacks the depth of Christian sermonizing that forms the meta-narrative of the *Vulgate* and lent itself to the hermetic impetus of Arthur's ominous dreams. Malory's Arthur is not at all instructed to give up his war and his kingdom, but instead promised victory— should he simply postpone the battle. The message is explicit in that God favors Arthur (over the just-excommunicated Mordred) and furthermore, this is the only version of the dream in which Gawain claims that he was sent to deliver the message by God himself. Unlike Arthur's previous dream which Malory shrouded in ambiguity, this one reads as nothing less than an explicitly divine communiqué. Yet if one is left uncertain about the genuineness first dream, how can one fully trust the message of the second? Malory is fairly clear in conveying his attitude regarding the forces of fortune, moral character and divine will:

[101] Malory, 684.

these forces are largely abstract and beyond the reach of human beings understand, quantify, and divide. Regardless, *Arthur* obviously believes the message of his dreams and he "entretyd Sir Mordred longe tyme. And at the laste Sir Mordred was aggreed for to have Cornwale and Kente by Kynge Arthurs dayes, and afftir that to have all Inglonde, after the dayes of Kynge Arthur."[102] This agreement, though apparently difficult to reach, appears favorable to all parties. Yet one must keep in mind that Arthur is being deceitful in these dealings: he has no intention of ultimately granting Mordred anything, and instead he is hedging his bets on Lancelot's future support to finally defeat the usurper. Either way, the deal never takes effect because when the armies meet on the field to formalize their agreement, distrust dominates the entire field:

> Arthur…warned all hys oste that and they se ony swerde drawyn, 'look ye com on fyersely and sle that traytoure Sir Mordred, for [I] in no wyse truste hym.' In like wyse Sir Mordred warned hys oste, that 'and ye se ony maner of swerde drawyn, loke that ye com on fyersely, and so sle all that before you stondyth, for in no wyse I woll truste for this tretyse.'[103]

The tragic irony is that while both men are correct in their suspicions, their mutual distrust makes the fragile concord impossible from the beginning. Both men are speaking of peace, but preparing for war. Malory compellingly stresses the unfeasibility of this contradiction when during deliberation:

> so cam oute an addir of a lytyll hethe buysshe, and hit stange a knight in the foote. And so whan the kynght felte hym so stonge… he drew hys swerde to sle the addir, and thought none other harme. And whan the oste on bothe partyes saw that swerde drawyn, than they blewe beamys, trumpettis, and hornys, and shoutted grymly, and so both ostis dressed hem togydirs[104]

[102] Malory, 684.

[103] Malory, 685.

[104] Malory, 685.

Malory conspicuously avoids relating the name of the knight and, more importantly, his allegiance. The fact that the man "thought none other harm" in this simple act of self-defense illustrates the true "harm" on the field that day: it is the warlike impulses and mutual distrust among *all* the men involved that starts the battle. The religious symbolism of the adder is impossible to overlook and one must ask if this is an instance of divine intervention designed to provoke the fateful battle, the very battle that God himself supposedly instructed Arthur to avoid. Yet the adder could also be readily interpreted as an occurrence of simple misfortune and it is exactly this uncertainty that Malory repeatedly creates (and, I imagine, relished).

The battle that inevitably ensues, however, quickly subordinates these questions to the grim consequences of combat. There "never syns was there seyne a more dolefuller batayle in no Crysten londe," reports the author, and "ever they fought stylle tylle hit was nere nyght, and by than was there an hondred thousand leyde dede uppon the erthe."[105] Of his entire army, only Mordred survives; on Arthur's side: he, Sir Lucan, and Sir Bedivere. Lucan warns Arthur that "if ye leve of now, thys wycked day of desteny ys paste."[106] Yet as a warrior, Arthur cannot help but finish a traitorous enemy when he gets the chance, and he swears that Mordred "shall never ascape myne hondes— for at a bettir avalye shall I never have hym."[107] This instance exemplifies the very personal nature of this struggle; Arthur is not satisfied with merely destroying Mordred's army, his intention is the total extermination of the traitor. Sir Lucan's comment is the final chance for Arthur to leave the battlefield alive and wait for Lancelot's army to support him, but just like the advice of the "dream-Gawain," it goes unutilized. Foregoing

[105] Malory, 685.

[106] Malory, 685.

[107] Malory, 685.

such advice, Arthur charges at Mordred, impaling him on a spear, and Mordred actually forces himself down the length of the spear, and "with hys swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne"[108] of Arthur. This fatal moment is shocking in its visceral intensity and tragic in the sense of a great king meeting his end. Yet in the context of the story, it is bizarrely cathartic. Within the framework of divine will, the narrative arc of Mordred's story begins with Arthur's sin, bringing both father and son outside of the natural order, which is then restored by their deaths. In the sense of human character, it is the demise of two imperfect men guided by pride and the knightly ethos to a destructive end. In regard to fortune, their mutual destruction is the result of tragic miscalculation and misunderstanding. Malory chooses not to divide and quantify these tripartite forces, nor to assign culpability to each within the narrative chain of events. The effect is a mirroring of reality wherein these forces constantly interact in ambiguous and unexpected ways. Regardless, the mutual destruction of Arthur and Mordred is the final conclusion, a moment in which chaos and turmoil cease, and the universe is balanced again.

However, the mutual destruction of Arthur and Mordred (across all the sources) raises a number of difficult questions. As mentioned earlier, the medieval philosophies frequently included the concept of "martial judgment," i.e., that the victor in battle was favored by God to be so, and that the combatant in the wrong is punished by God with his own defeat. What, then, are readers meant to surmise from a mutual death? That both Arthur and Mordred were punished by God? That the authors intended to deflate the concept of martial judgment? Or that God wasn't responsible for the outcome at all? Compelling arguments could be made for all these options, but ultimately few definite conclusions can be drawn. The Arthur-Mordred story

[108] Malory, 686.

thus ends in a moralistic vacuum, and one cannot state succinctly what maxim was intended to be exemplified. The heavily sermonizing author(s) of the *Vulgate* promote the religious life through the examples of Lancelot and Guinevere, who take to monasteries after Arthur's death. Yet this message is forced in at the end of the story and has little bearing on the Arthur-Mordred dynamic, except as a counterpoint to the injurious aspects of the knightly lifestyle. Furthermore, Arthur and Mordred's mutual death at Camlaan, while certainly an *ending*, is a frustratingly poor *resolution*. The late-medieval additions of the prophecy of Arthur's future return[109] appears to be a device for pacifying readers after such a moralistically ambiguous conclusion, as it subtly implies that the story of Arthur has not really ended.

## V.Conclusion

In the end, there is no single "grand conclusion" as to what readers may learn from the Arthur-Mordred relationship. It is a chaotic "briar patch" of varying, and frequently competing, interpretations offered by a diverse assortment of authors across time and place. However, it is this very multiplicity of explications that yield a wealth of information through their subtle variations. The Latin histories, Nennius' *Historum Brittania* and the *Annales Cambria*, offer a tantalizing clue that Arthur and Mordred *may* have died fighting one another. *The Welsh Triads* support this decision in their unflattering depiction of Mordred's behavior at court. These early mentions, likely combined with now-lost elements of the oral tradition, were adapted and expounded by Welsh and British authors like Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon. These authors wrote histories, and while their works are not legitimate histories in the modern,

[109] "Hic iacet Arturus, Rex quodam, Rexque futuris" "Here lies Arthur, Once and future king" from Malory.

empirical sense, they still offer something of an attempt at objectivity. Though both relate fantastical elements, these works speak to an earnest effort to factually recount the Arthur legend. What Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon created, respectively, were cogent narratives of the events leading to Mordred's usurpation and Arthur's downfall while focusing on the role of (mis)fortune and human character.

The *Alliterative Morte*, also by a British writer, takes the broad narrative arc of the "historical" accounts written by Geoffrey and Layamon and expands the role of fantastical elements, namely Arthur's prophetic dreams. The *Alliterative Morte* author places a high importance on a philosophical explanation of the symbolism behind the Wheel of Fortune. This represents a watershed moment in the Arthurian tradition, a moment when history and legend is openly and unequivocally transformed into a vehicle for philosophical dialogue and moral instruction.

The composition of the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles in France supports the theory that by the high Middle Ages, the Arthur story was evolving into an explicitly moral narrative. The heavily Christian sermonizing found throughout the *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* forms a profound meta-narrative of religious instruction that clearly resembles a "salvation history." Thus, Arthur and Mordred are models of behavior, both good and bad, and their respective temporal struggles are intended to inform the spiritual decisions of the readership. The degree of moralizing is unique to these two works in that they shade Arthur's worldly activities—sexuality, kingship, and warring— in a highly negative light. The spiritual implications of the *Vulgate* are so extreme as to imply that these activities are intrinsically, and invariably, soul-destroying. Thus, both Arthur and Mordred, as knights and as leaders, are virtually doomed to

spiritual ruin from the start. However, the *Vulgate* consistently espouses such lofty religious ideals that few characters within the story could be considered truly righteous; with the exception of hermit-monks and the saintly figures of Sir Perceval and Sir Galahad, all the *Vulgate* characters exist in varying states of impiety. While Arthur's incest and Mordred's betrayal are particularly egregious transgressions, within this context of near-ubiquitous sin they lose some of their impact. This is certainly not exonerating, but it is worth reiterating that the *Vulgate(s)* are frequently critical of Arthur and his reign in order to magnify the importance of Sir Lancelot. Lancelot, for all his imperfections throughout the story, takes to a monastery after Arthur's death and becomes the archetype of religious piety that Arthur is not, but the story consistently champions. The *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles present a unique view of divinity through the relationship between Arthur and Mordred. It is the proverbial battle between good and evil, yet the two characters are not archetypes or symbols— Arthur is not wholly "good," nor is Mordred completely "evil." Instead, they are merely conduits through which a battle being waged on the divine level is played out in the worldly realm. Both Arthur and Mordred vacillate in between good and evil, always possessing the potential for either, and frequently acting in one way or the other. Ultimately, close analysis of the text tends to draw both characters to the center of this polemic worldview. As mentioned above, their mutual death at Camlaan leaves a moral-theological void at the end of the story. I would like to suggest that this ending confirms the proverbial good-versus-evil theory by simply not resolving it. Though Arthur and Mordred both die, thus ending their stories, at Camlaan, the larger "story" is an eternal one. This divine battle does not end with them. Thus, the French *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* present an analysis of divine will that illuminates, but does not attempt to demystify God's workings. Like stepping into a medieval cathedral, the narrative and theological "space" of the *Vulgate(s)* is one of such

immense grandeur and minute complexity that one is inevitably overwhelmed and awe-struck by it.

By the late fifteenth century, when Sir Thomas Malory was penning his *Le Morte Darthur*, the tradition had already been thoroughly developed from a sparse legend into a broad and detailed literary tradition with many competing variations in interpretation. Malory confounds these interpretations by "sewing" them together in an intriguing, but frequently confusing manner. Character, fortune, and divine will interact in ambiguous and unexpected ways that force the readers to constantly reassess the meaning of the story and the nature of forces at work within it. It is a distinctly *human* narrative realm that Malory creates in the *Morte Darthur*, and one that mirrors the bewildering complexity of reality. While the other authors sought to *explain* the chain of events leading to Arthur's downfall, Malory seems content to simply *relate* the events and challenge his readers to draw their own conclusions. The creation of this conceptual interaction between text and reader is the true genius of Malory, and why his work remains such a prominent feature of Arthuriana.

Through the relationship between Arthur and Mordred, medieval Arthurian authors examined the issues of divinity, fate, political rights, kinship, and merit in the martial culture of the Early Middle Ages. They explore the often convoluted nature of interpersonal relationships, how human agency interacts with divine will, and how the nebulous concept of fortune can unexpectedly change any course of events. It is within the conceptual "forum" of the Arthur-Mordred dynamic that these issues are most thoroughly meted out, and modern readers stand to gain a great deal of insight into the medieval world. Through Arthur and Mordred we see the tenuous nature of medieval power dynamics— how a ruling system built on martial ability and

personal loyalty is always in danger of rapid disintegration as well as the grim consequences that seem to inevitably follow. The sources continually suggest that fortune is fickle and power is corruptive. The viciousness with which both Arthur and Mordred pursue one another's demise makes it easy to forget that they are, in fact, blood relatives (be it uncle-nephew or father-son), and when one remembers this fact the tragedy of the story is dramatically amplified. The inherent sadness of Arthur's downfall cannot be ignored; compared with the magnanimous heroism that establishes Arthur and his Round Table of knights, the collapse of the kingdom is filled with futile destruction, prideful animosity, and ignoble death. It is a sterile, non-generative narrative world that is constantly permeated by decay. In this context, it would be simple to point out Mordred as the sole source of discord, like some kind of demon that has cast a spell of acrimony onto Camelot. Yet this interpretation would be unjust to the story at large and belie the complexity of the integral, but underdeveloped Mordred. He is no more an archetype of evil than Arthur is an archetype of virtue. Both are complicated and imperfect characters, and they must be evaluated as such. While there is no single, unified framework through which to understand the relationship between Arthur and Mordred, one can always safely say that there is more to it than first meets the eye. As characters, neither fits perfectly into a "type" and this makes them read as fully actualized human beings who are navigating complex and challenging interpersonal and spiritual dilemmas. These dilemmas transcend time and place, making the Arthur story, in all of its forms, a palpable connection to the human past. This ensures the future survival of the tradition in readers' continually reinvigorated fascination with it. A fascination, of course, to which Mordred is central.

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Note on *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* sources: While I have found no translational discrepancies in regard to *meaning*, I have drawn quotes from several different translations for their particular linguistic beauty.


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